

Mary “Nickie” Valdez

September 10, 1940 -

“The passion [for activism] is the passion
- you’re either in it or not.” —Nickie Valdez



Nickie and Deb at an early International Woman's Day March in San Antonio.

Such were the words that Nickie spoke in describing her dedication to her work as an LGBTQ activist in the San Antonio community and in her pursuit of acceptance and equality in the

Catholic Church

through her work with *Dignity USA* and *Dignity San Antonio* that never waned despite repeated rejections by the faith community and innumerable clergy. Nickie prevailed winning over clergy, institutions and multiple communities in her fight for social and spiritual justice.

Nickie was in her early 20s when she was carted off downtown and put in jail for being a lesbian. The SAPD vice-squad regularly raided gay bars with paddy wagons arriving to round up men and women who were then separated and carted off to jail charged with lewd and lascivious behavior. If you had a civil service job—at Kelly, for example—you could wind up losing your job for simply being at a gay bar. These experiences began Nickie’s trajectory as an LGBTQ activist.

Nickie realized early that her life’s work was to fight for social justice and civil rights in the name of her community—the LGBTQ community. The fight to validate LGBTQ people led her to fight to change laws such as the sodomy laws of Texas (21.06) that would take decades to change.

Nickie’s first experiences in organizing were focused on doing work with the *Gay Switchboard* and the *Free Clinic* in the early 1970s. Her earliest grassroots activism found her involved in the

first gay march in 1976 downtown at Travis Park. About fifty people showed up and marched up Presa to Commerce to Hemisfair Plaza. People on the streets were surprised. Some stared, others applauded. A few joined in. In the end up to 75 folks gathered for that rally. A few anti-gay folks threw eggs close to Alamo Plaza. That March would set the stage for many marches to come including the

annual *International Women’s Day March* that began in the 90s in San Antonio and have now taken place for 30 years with Nickie and her partner Deb being part of it early on.

At the national level, Nickie joined in the work of the *National Organization of Women* and became involved with local LGBTQ organizations connected to work at the national level like *HRCF*. An early experience that taught Nickie the power of bridging communities occurred when the conference, *A Sense of Belonging*, took place in San Antonio in 1976 bringing such notables from the gay lesbian community as Morris Kike, Del Martin (*Daughters of Bilitis*), and Rep. Elaine Noble (the first openly gay person elected to statewide office as a representative in the Massachusetts General Assembly). The conference was to take place at the *Oak Hills Country Club*, but at the last minute the doctors asked that it not be held there. Consequently, the *Ella Austin Community Center* opened its doors for the conference. Time and again, the LGBTQ community would come up against resistance in their efforts to come together but they were welcomed elsewhere, often by people of color communities.

By the 90s, LGBTQ organizations abound in San Antonio and Nickie found herself involved with groups such as *SALGO* (*San Antonio Lesbian Gay Organization*) which focused on social awareness and education and then, later *SALGA* (*San Antonio Lesbian Gay Assembly*) that existed from 1990 to 1998. *SALGA* was organized to bring together lesbian and gay organizations, businesses, and individuals and

defend the human and civil rights of the LGBTQ community. Nickie was also the first chair of the *San Antonio Equal Rights Political Caucus*, later known as the *Stonewall Democrats*. And, Nickie was also part of the *Esperanza Center* since its inception in 1987. In all of the LGBTQ documented archives (many of which are at



Lifetime Activist Award presented to Nickie in 2007 for Esperanza’s 20th anniversary made by MujerArtes.



Nickie and her lifelong partner and wife, Deb Meyers who celebrated life together for over 35 years.

— ¡Siempre, Presente!

— December 25, 2020

UTSA), Nickie Valdez's name figures prominently.

Through the years as attitudes changed, Nickie's activism became more focused on civil and domestic rights—issues that Nickie advocated for that included marriage equality. She and Deb Myers, her life partner obtained a marriage license at the Bexar County Courthouse in June 2015. Valdez and Myers had met through *Dignity* in 1985 and were joined in a holy union in 1989. Finally, in 2015 they were legally married. Nicky noted then that with partner benefits, health insurance, adoption rights, inheritance rights and many other such issues remaining unresolved for the LGBTQ community that *"We are not yet in a safe space and need to continue working on things."*

Nicky's life's work has been grassroots activism—getting together in kitchens to write letters, participating in marches, demonstrations and getting attention for issues at hand. She considers herself one of the lucky ones who didn't get burned out—but, her true passion was as Co-founder and president of *Dignity San Antonio*. She reached out to gay Catholics about God's Word as early as the mid-1960s, a few years before the national *DignityUSA* organization formed in 1969. A lifelong Catholic, Valdez helped establish the *Dignity San Antonio* chapter in 1976.

In her lifelong quest to find a place to worship as out LGBTQ people in the Catholic Church, Nickie and her partner, Deb ran up against roadblocks time and again. Going from one Catholic student center to another and from one church to another and from community space to community space they settled in until someone would come along and demand their outster.

Still, Nickie held fast to her spiritual quest and her belief in being accepted by the Catholic Church saying, *Dignity is my heart and my soul*. Rejection and expulsion did not deter Nickie from her mission to be accepted as a whole human being in the Catholic Church. Her partner, Deb, recalled, *"Her whole call*

was to help people recognize that they were created in the image and likeness of God, and God loved them just as they are created." As a result of her tenacity, Nickie celebrated *Dignity San Antonio's* 40th

anniversary after being ousted from St. Ann's Catholic Church when Bishop Flores was no longer in charge. *Dignity* celebrated their 40th at *St. Paul's Episcopal Church*, one of many non-Catholic venues that gave refuge to *Dignity SA* through the years.

At her passing, Nickie's tenacity won out. Her remains were processed out of the *Oblate Chapel* where her *Celebration of Life* was held. Three priests co-celebrated the mass which is the soul of the Catholic faith—something she never allowed anyone to take from her. Her passing was also noted on a national level, not only by *Dignity USA* but also in an extensive article in the *National Catholic Reporter*.

In San Antonio, Nickie was honored time and again in recent years, most notably as San Antonio's *Peace Laureate* in January 2019, an honor bestowed by the peaceCENTER. She shared the honor with Rebecca Flores, former state director of the *UFW* and Patricia S. Castillo of the *P.E.A.C.E. Initiative*. In 2007, the *Esperanza Peace and Justice Center* recognized Nickie for a lifetime of activism in the LGBTQ community as part of *Esperanza's* 20th anniversary celebration. She was to live life another 14 years adding to her lifetime of activism.

Nickie was preceded in death by her 16-year-old son, Robert Nicklaus Valdez Minor, a *Central Catholic High School* student who was killed by a drunken driver in 1988. She leaves behind her beloved Deb, her family and many, many friends and allies who will keep her spirit of love and generosity alive.



Nickie and Deb together with friends at the Esperanza's anniversary celebration.



The *Esperanza* staff, board and Buena Gente extend our deepest condolences to all who loved Nickie and hold her in high esteem. Nickie Valdez, Rest in Power! Donations to *Dignity USA* in memory of Nickie can be made at: dignityusa.org/content/ways-give or mail to: *DignityUSA*, PO Box 376, Medford MA 02155.

QEPD/RIP

2019 San Antonio Peace Laureates included Nickie Valdez of *Dignity* (center), Rebecca Flores of the *UFW* (left) and Patricia Castillo of the *P.E.A.C.E. Initiative*.